

The Clipper Visits Bill O'Connell

BY NANCY McCAFFERTY



Bill O'Connell

(Bill O'Connell and his wife and 2 children live on Winter St.)

He wouldn't make any hard predictions so I couldn't place my bets early but you know you've met a winner when you shake hands with Bill O'Connell, sports anchorman of Channel 7.

"It's the variety I like the best," said O'Connell. "The sports writers for the *Globe* specialize in a particular sport but we get to do it all. I couldn't think of a more interesting job." The contents change from day to day and while O'Connell covers all the major sports, he relishes the chance to include unusual or off-beat items. Currently, his colleague John Dennis is giving a summary of the toughest golf holes in New England, and O'Connell just finished a report on the perils of life as a rodeo clown.

O'Connell's introduction to broadcasting began in 1954 with radio. He maintains that this is an exceptional training ground where a young kid fresh from school can get his bearings. Radio's realm encompasses such diversities that many who enter are astonished to find their talents and interests lie in areas they hadn't suspected. Not all like broadcasting and yet wish to remain in another aspect of the business. For these, the options are innumerable and satisfying.

"Many people feel they can walk out of BU or somewhere and go into TV reporting. This simply isn't true," said O'Connell. He said this not with smugness but as a straightforward fact. "As in sport itself, the professionals are so good, they make it look deceptively easy."

The transition from radio to television isn't always successful. People who grew up with radio as the primary source of in-home entertainment will recall how many famous radio stars couldn't adjust to television. "It's different," said O'Connell. "It's visual, people have to see what you're talking about. A script must be written and timed to fit the tape being used. The most difficult part of the shift for me was learning to read while looking up at a camera." But he is of the opinion that radio allows a person to develop and fine-tune a style, experiment with and expand one's knowledge, and offers the broadest range of experiences to draw upon. He would recommend it to anyone starting out, even if they land in the boondocks for a while. After all, Dan Rather used to do weather at an obscure Texas radio station.

The competition for the few anchor slots in an area is rapacious. There just aren't that many jobs to go around. Auditions are held—many are called but few are chosen. In addition, Boston is the 5th or 6th largest television market in the country. Production expenses and company profits can't and won't be jeopardized by someone who isn't sure of what he's doing. Salaries depend upon the size of the market and the popularity of the anchorman. O'Connell has high praise for competing station Channel 5's Natalie Jacobson, who not only handles her job well but is a popular figure in the Boston vicinity.

The anchor spot on a television news program is similar to a finely balanced juggling act. The person on the screen doesn't roll the tape being shown behind him nor does he control the lights, sound, camera, etc. It is comparable to a chain reaction where the many working parts are geared to yield a finished product. If something goes wrong within the chain of events, it's usually the anchorman who camouflages it or provides an explanation. With eyes of Greater Boston upon you and nowhere to hide, it must take Herculean concentration and resistance to pressure to mask frustration or befuddlement while at the same time keeping pace with the ticking second

hands of the clock. O'Connell told of the time he was covering 2 local football games. The information came in shortly before air time and he forgot to number the pages of the script, a device which helps keep it in sync with the tape of the games. The pictures were in black and white. About 4 seconds into the piece, he realized that he couldn't determine which team was which. There were no uniform colors to help him identify which game was being shown and everybody looks the same under a football helmet. "I just kept reading," he said. "I never knew if it was Harvard's or BU's game on the screen behind me. It's one of those things you hope will never happen but occasionally does."

O'Connell's working day begins at 3:30 pm, except for the several days a week he goes in earlier to tape a special interest feature or cover a press conference. The job is full of the joy of the unexpected. If there is post-season play for an area professional team or a momentous event, such as the Red Sox spring training, the hours are longer and can get very peculiar. On normal days (is there such a thing?) he can leave the station by 11:45 pm.

Channel 7's sporting news is divided into 2 segments, the first, 3½ minutes long and the second lasts 2½ minutes. New stories, scores and follow-up reports must fit into that time period. As long as an hour or more can be spent actually taping a 2½-minute feature. In past years, that meant that a floor somewhere in the studio was covered with cut film. Now tape is used to get action shots because of better color and clarity, there is no waiting for film development, and because it is reusable, making it desirable for economic reasons as well. In reviewing the tape, the broadcasters record the numbers of the sections of tape they intend to use. It is then given to the video tape editor who coordinates it with the reporter's narration. That narration must be timed to the tape. O'Connell gave the example of a single (hit) in baseball. On tape, it takes 10 or 11 seconds. It cannot be shortened or lengthened and so the information must be given in 10 or 11 seconds. Since television is visual, a newscast is necessarily composed segments of action verbalized by a report. It's like the game in which a player must get all the differently shaped pieces into their proper holes before the timer goes off and jolts the pieces out of position.

All of the Channel 7 anchormen go out and do field reporting. They are backed by a team of spot reporters who describe live events or special features. The persuasion and content of the stories are the territory of the individuals. Photographers hold an esteemed position in television. Their taping documents and credits a story and can tailor the visual effects to suit a reporter's narration. This can be done by what is taped and what is not and how it is done. It doesn't change the facts of a story but provides an outlet for clarification and interpretation. A producer brings all of the components together everyday, several times a day and when the program is presented at 6 and 11 and the anchormen appear to be having such an urbane good time, it's unlikely that a viewer will reflect upon the hard work that went before.

An interesting technical side to television is an element called the chroma-key. It has to do with colors. The chroma-key eliminates certain colors, brown or blue, sometimes both. If the anchorman is wearing the color the chroma-key has eliminated and that color is in the tape being shown on the screen behind him, the action on the tape (homerun, touchdown, hockey fight) will show up on the clothes of that color. It must be fascinating to watch a basketball game on your tie.

There is also the mini-cam, a small, lighter portable camera whose only cables run from the camera to the van, making it highly mobile. The big advantage of the mini-cam is that it is possible to broadcast from the scene. There is no delay for picture development or need for a breakneck tear back to the studio to be in time for the news. The van is parked on a level higher than the camera and the tape is micro-waved to the station. A reflector, perched high atop the Prudential Building in Boston, is used for this purpose. However, micro-waves do not bend or go around buildings, so there must be a straight line of vision from the van to the reflector. The most practical way to do this is to put the reflector on the highest point seen from the largest number of places in the city.

And now, back to Bill. His association with television sports dates back to 1966. He has been in and out of locker rooms, sports facilities, training camps and has seen enough to venture a few opinions. (But he wouldn't tell me who is going to win the World Series). O'Connell rates the Celtics as the pro athletes in the best physical condition. Continuous running for 48 minutes will do it every time. Football and hockey players extend themselves in frenzied spurts and then pause to regroup. Baseball doesn't demand the unremitting movement of the other sports.

Managers and owners are aware of their team's image and most strive for harmonious relations with the press, some more than others. O'Connell said the Celtics are the easiest as a team to interview. They make themselves accessible to the writers and it is believed that Red Auerbach selects his players not only for their athletic ability but for valuable qualities which smooth and soothe public opinion. John Havlicek is a genuine "nice guy." For outstanding, individual interviews, former Bruins Ken Hodge and Eddie Westfall deserve mention. O'Connell said that the Bruins are cooperative with interviews but some of the French Canadian players feel their English isn't polished enough for the camera and are somewhat shy about speaking up. With the Patriots, writers usually go to Steve Grogan or Steve Nelson, because they are both well spoken and can astutely sum up a situation. The Red Sox are the most difficult. Carl Yastremski is great with everybody but there are a few players who duck reporters and hide in the training room to avoid an interview. In circumstances such as these, it becomes uncomfortable for everyone else.

The super egos are there because the super talent is there. In any highly visible arena such as sports or television, for that matter, a balance must be struck so that one's self-image doesn't interfere with one's ability. O'Connell said that there are many athletes with enormous egos who have learned to control it. They refuse to allow it to obliterate their chance to play a sport they love. Those who never learn to step outside themselves are not pleasant people to be around.

The single most exciting event O'Connell has witnessed was the Celtic's triple overtime game against Phoenix in Boston Garden in 1976. "It was unbelievable," he said. "Most basketball people think that was the best performance they've ever seen. Neither team would quit, absolutely incredible."

Boston is a sports town. Hundreds of thousands of people live and die vicariously with their hearty heroes and follow their favorite teams with a fervor that's contagious. Bill O'Connell, in his deep natural, easy voice, heralds the news fans stay up late for. His warmth and wit beckon viewers to enter the world of competition and accomplishment. It's talent and this professional is so good, he makes it look easy.